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Minutes 05/28/2009

Arlington Historic District Commissions

Whittemore Robbins House
 May 28, 2009

Commissioners

Present: A. Frisch, M. Kramer, D. Levy, S. Makowka, T. Smurzynski, J. Worden

Commissioners

Not Present: M. Hope Berkowitz, B. Cohen, J. Hindmarsh, M. Logan, M. Penzenik, M. Potter

Guests

Present: B. Amidon, D. Cerundolo, C. Reitzel, L. Tunik, M. Dempsey, G. Hill, D. Eng, Y. Avrahami

1. MEETING CALLED TO ORDER 8:00pm
2. APPOINTMENT OF ALTERNATE COMMISSIONERS
 - A. Jason/Gray – S. Makowka, T. Smurzynski, A. Frisch, D. Levy
 - B. Mt. Gilboa/Crescent Hill – S. Makowka, T. Smurzynski, A. Frisch, (B. Cohen will abstain on continued hearings);
 - C. Pleasant Street – S. Makowka, T. Smurzynski, A. Frisch, D. Levy
3. MINUTES
 - a. S. Makowka requested tabling of the minutes from March and April, J. Worden seconded, approved by all to table until next month.
4. COMMUNICATIONS
 - a. Temporary sign 733 Mass. Ave. for summer program; S. Makowka spoke about sign being temporary, suggested adding condition of time limit (6/1 – 8/15); J. Worden suggested that means of attachment be non-destructive to facade of building.
 - b. B. Cohen said M. Byrne (Building Dept.) called about 187 Lowell Street and asked her to take look at plans once submitted.
 - c. S. Makowka spoke with owner of 195 Pleasant Street. Re: replacement of stone/concrete stairs; applicant wants to change type of stone. S. Makowka suggested looking at alternative stone treads. Applicant to present informally tonight and may ask for a 10 day certificate.
 - d. 156 Westminster Ave. requesting CONA re: driveway, front steps and back landing
5. OTHER BUSINESS
 - a. 215 Pleasant Street (Shed – Gruber) D. Levy met with him and they're ready to go
 - b. S. Makowka is still working on 40B letter
 - c. S. Makowka, J. Worden, M. Kramer, and T. Smurzynski attended AHC's sponsored lecture on preserving older houses.
 - d. Projects #82 and #90 can be removed per Alex Frisch – they are completed
 - e. J. Worden said new garage at 28-30 Jason has slowed due to foundation problems.
 - f. B. Cohen said porch work at 20 Wellington is underway.
6. NEW BUSINESS
 - a. Continuation of Formal Hearing re: 10 Jason Court. Applicant, B. Armidon gave presentation of new plans to enclosing existing rear porch with new second story addition above. Applicant stated that the building inspector indicated that it was okay to build within existing footprint even though existing porch does not conform to existing setbacks. He provided a rendering of the new addition by tracing a picture on paper showing new views. He confirmed that while the proposed addition is on the rear and is below the existing ridge line, it is visible from Jason Street. The applicant also presented a picture of another gambrel style house with an addition at 194 Pleasant Street as an example of a similar addition existing in the District. J. Worden clarified that the existing porch is not original to

the building and that the building inspector probably did not know that the existing porch was built without a permit, and that it is his understanding that the pre-existing exemption only applies to an existing legal structure. Thus, although removing the structure is not required, its presence can't be used to build even in existing footprint. S. Makowka clarified that zoning requirements and potential exemptions were not directly the AHDC's responsibility and suggested that the applicant contact the ZBA for clarification.

Given the location of the house and the visibility of the addition being proposed, D. Levy indicated that the revised plan was a much better idea rather than the original proposed dormers. He suggested that with an architect maybe the presented elevations could be developed to the point to where the Commission might be able to approve it. He indicated that he would want to see more detailed information on the proposed back of the house before he could ever consider approving. S. Makowka said it appeared that the Commission might have enough information before it to discuss the massing of the house but agreed that the drawings as presented offered little specific detail. J. Worden had a couple of colored photos showing existing house in its current state and pictures of a nearby house with similar additions which he considered to be inappropriate. He also stated that the comparison to 194 Pleasant Street, which is a much bigger and more substantial building with a gambrel roof above the boxy stuff on back, to be not a good one in his opinion. He submits it's not a very good design, and allowing such alterations of original structures is not a good precedent for the District.

B. Cohen said if the architect was careful about how the roof works in back and ties into main roof could create almost a saltbox on back.. J. Worden said that the problem is that such an addition needs some room and the existing 12 feet setback of the main house does not provide adequate room of this addition. B. Cohen said all the surrounding lots are non-conforming little lots and originally might have had setback requirements, but not minimum square foot requirements. Thus, the houses, typical worker's cottages, in this area are shoe-horned in there. When people need to expand, tiny backyard is the expense and, thus, is not necessarily bothered that there is only 3 feet in the back of the house. J. Worden said suggested that 3 feet was too small a space.

S. Makowka reiterated that the question before the Commission is: Is the proposed addition appropriate on this house, given existing condition? He said that the new revised plans do address some of the issues raised at the prior hearing. Specifically, the new plan is less visible than what was proposed before at last month's meeting. B. Cohen said roofline is going to be critical here. J. Worden stated that if something is approved by the Commission, it has to go to the zoning board for approval and because of the closeness of the proposed structure to the lot line, the entire addition would likely have to be built with fireproof materials according to his conversation with building inspector M. Byrne. Mr. Worden also noted this is an example of where small houses are part of a District and should be preserved since it affects the ambiance of the district.

Regarding massing in particular location – T. Smurzynski said he thinks it would be permissible from a HDC view, that this alternative is an acceptable version, it could work. M. Kramer said the revised plan is better but that she needs to see views from all angles. D. Levy said that a good architect could come up with a nice plan showing the details. A. Frisch expressed concern about the lot being tight – especially since the applicant said it's tight already. S. Makowka suggested the Applicant's revisions were going in the right direction but that a number of concerns remain related to the details including what the views are from different angles, how the addition joins the existing house, what the materials are, etc. J. Worden said he disagrees with the Chairman's summary, that the massing created by adding to little houses, jammed that close to lot line, would be a bad precedent for the Commission to take. He stated that the ZBA has looked at 2 other applications to add onto the back of houses on the same street and has denied them. S. Makowka reiterated that in any case, the sketches provided tonight aren't sufficient to allow the Commission to act right now and asked applicant to extend hearing to allow for consideration of more detailed plans. The applicant agreed to continued hearing until July 15.

b. Continuation of Formal Hearing re: 179 Westminster (Cerundolo). The applicant summarized that the house is currently a 2 family and that they would like to restore it as a 1 family with numerous exterior changes. Previously they came to present to the Commission and were asked to reconsider some details as well as provide more specifics. The current plan has a number of details that have changed. Applicant introduced Brad Tortola who is their architect and he hopefully can answer questions.

Basically, they have modified the proposed front porch so that it is more of a worker's Victorian. They simplified the side entrance by removing the columns per M. Penzenik's suggestion to emphasize the main entrance, although the side door is staying. In response to S. Makowka's question, the architect stated that the vestibule on the front porch expands the entry area to allow an open area by the stairs. To enhance the house it would be nice to not have the shot gun type of entry that currently exists.

J. Worden noted that the left side "tower" for the new staircase has gone from all windows to only a few windows. B. Cohen noted that two windows did remain but seemed to be oddly proportioned for the space. She suggested modifying the proportions and making the windows above landing taller in proportion to other windows.

The Commission discussed the likely condition under the existing artificial siding. The applicant indicated that where they have looked, the bottom portion of the house is clapboard underneath. B. Cohen said that the top is probably shingled, but won't know until siding removed. Either is acceptable.

In response to questions, the applicant indicated that the front door is being replaced, and that a Victorian period door that would be appropriate. The Commissioners indicated that the existing door with a single side-lite would not be a traditional element. Double doors as found on other houses in the district would be appropriate as would a single door in a more appropriate style. For example, 123 Lowell Street has the original double door style. The architect specified that the windows would be wood full unit replacements, not inserts. Removing siding and replacing with siding or shingles.

J. Worden asked if explored under siding – only bottom floor and that was clapboard. He asked because he worries about strong horizontal line with roof on porch. Possible second or third level may be shingles. Decorative shingle may be appropriate. A. Frisch said the proposed front entablature concerns him and suggested that a horizontal molding that was less prominent may blend better with flourish up to the peak. The Commission suggested a need to be guided by the details that are uncovered when the siding was removed. The applicant agreed with that approach.

S. Makowka suggested that there is not necessarily a requirement that everything be duplicated a 100%. J. Worden said ideally if we can see what was there originally, the applicant would base their judgment of how to proceed based on those findings. S. Makowka paraphrased: it would have been a common application to have clapboards below and shingles on top, but that was not necessarily a requirement here and that the project should be informed by but be guided by what's there, however there's room for flexibility. He continued that repeating band molding or frieze in place of the proposed entablature on the front gable would be his preference because a similar detail is already present on other parts of house. A. Frisch said most concern with what was originally there – if you want different, then we look to see what historically would have been done on that area.

D. Levy asked about stucco specified to cover the vertical surfaces below the porch decking. The architect agreed that the stucco as shown was "weird" but was done to copy another house in the District. S. Makowka said vertical boards or horizontal "privacy" lattice would work better, and that the stucco was not typical. S. Makowka feels comfortable to leave final approval of discussed details to be subject to monitor approval based on what is found under existing siding.

J. Worden asked about garage – looking at old and new, asked what they have in mind. The applicant clarified that they were not proposing to do anything with garage at this point and that the only issues before the Commission tonight were: removing siding on house, adding new deck on front, stair bay addition, replacement of windows, removing side entrance columns. S. Makowka said that when restoring the siding you will see shadow lines of original details and we typically ask to restore the windows to look appropriate including complete casings. B. Cohen asked about the plans to include a water table and corner boards and the architect confirmed that they planned to include appropriately sized water table and cornerboards – there is usually something there and they will report to Commission findings once the siding is removed.

S. Makowka moved approving modified application for removal of siding, with specification that the applicant work with monitor on reviewing details on trim, water table, etc. and monitor approve all final details prior to installation, replacement of windows with new units to be all wood, consistent with Commission's guidelines; addition of front porch as proposed in most recent set of designs; vertical lattice or slats for porch, final design to be approved by monitor. No pressure treated wood to be visible. Removal of columns for reworking of second entrance, addition of side bay with stairs as shown with most recent plans. Front door final approval to be approved by monitor also – wooden door with glass lites, side lites, whatever is appropriate, to be approved with monitor prior to installation. Seconded by A. Frisch. No further discussion and no comments from neighbors. The Commission voted unanimously in favor with B. Cohen abstaining from the vote. Monitor appointed B. Cohen

c. Formal hearing re: 187 Lowell Street (J&K Construction) for addition of new house. S. Makowka summarized that the current proposal is a new application only for the site designated lot 3, which is the location of the proposed house not approved under the Owner's prior application. He continued to summarize that although the Commission did not say nothing could ever be built on that lot, it did strongly encourage the Applicant to explore a substantially smaller and more subsidiary-like building, such as a carriage house style. Atty. Wm. Dillon, representing applicant (JK Construction) spoke about the process. In summary, the goal in this application was, understanding Commission that if house were to be approved, it would have to be smaller with more substantially smaller footprint, floor area, lower elevation, and setback more from street. R. Botterio, applicant's designer, argued that in the new plans they had reduced the footprint. The basic concept was of it being a carriage house lookalike designed to maintain a look within that that fabric. They have lowered the 1st floor basement in front, made the structure more narrow, reduced the length by 18 feet, and have set it back further than before from street. The design of the proposed house is similar to the existing house, with similar brackets, although simpler in comparison. In response to questions, he stated that the separation between the existing 187 structure and the proposed structure is 35'9" at the front and 26'9" at the back.

They also thought that changing the driveway to keep next to property line would help minimize it. B. Cohen asked about curb cut shown on the plan and B. Botterio replied that is an existing staircase that goes up onto the yard. He confirmed that this proposal would require an additional curb cut for the driveway.

S. Makowka suggested that the obvious question to throw out regarding this proposal was that the prior rejected proposal for a house over 2900sf was considered to be too large, shoe horned in, and impinged much too much on the original house at 187. The Commission strongly indicated that an alternative would be something with a substantially smaller footprint, one that was more consistent with other existing structures in neighborhood, say in the 1300-1400sf range. There the Commission was talking about a potential structure with a 600 sf footprint, however, here you're talking about a substantially larger footprint than what was suggested. B. Botterio replied that there were many suggestions – one of which was that any structure be a small, ancillary building. However, that would not work for the owner based on a desire to have it be sold. Originally, they had much larger building in mind and they cut it back a lot in comparison to original, more than last presentation. He stated that it would not be reasonable to have it be a 500 sf footprint. For example, the buildings next door look very different with capes across the street and larger properties up that side of the Street. Attorney Dillon said overarching goal they were trying to achieve was to reduce the size and alter the style. Also, there is a limit in the owner's mind where they cross a line and it becomes not marketable. As presented to the Commission before, they tried to do some analysis of other houses in district and have shown that the floor area ratio of house to others is consistent as is the spacing of the other houses. Having it reduced further from prior proposal, those points are still being met and the proposal is even maybe more compliant than before.

B. Cohen said looking at 175 Lowell Street (located to the right of proposed house), it's quite noticeably smaller than footprint size on lot 3, she is curious about what the actual footprint is. Owner of 175 Lowell stated that his house size is 2100 sf.

S. Makowka stated that per the evidence presented in earlier hearings, the existing structure at 187 Lowell was originally situated on a special lot. The siting on lot of the proposed house is visually too close to 187, and is still so long and set forward such that you don't read it as an ancillary structure. It really is a big thing being put in to this narrow slot between the existing houses. He continued to say that this is a doubling the size of what he would envision in that space. Although he does appreciate the direction the Applicant is moving in, the massing is keeping him hung up right now. B. Cohen said the massing of the back end of house concerns her – you will see it. It is important to reduce impact of this house. A smaller structure set back in the corner of the lot would look ancillary.

B. Botterio stated that the proposed house was not an ancillary structure. One concept is to look at this as if it might have been the carriage house with additions that went on later. He continued: from the sides, this doesn't look like one large structure, this looks like maybe you added on to one main structure.

Applicant suggested that the vision for a subsidiary structure is appreciated, but pointed out that the Elder Terrace lots have much greater density. S. Makowka countered that the density of the Elder Terrace lots was not an appropriate comparison to use against this lot. J. Worden commented that the Commission has been consistent. In March of this year, for example, he spoke of house with a 600 sf footprint; a house with less than 2000 sf living space. The message was perfectly clear: a small, ancillary building, that was barnlike or carriage house and placed on the back of lot. This existing lot 187, is one of Arlington's endangered landscapes -- you were allowed to build a structure on one side, but we were very clear that on the other side anything must be smaller. Your problem concerning making money is not the Commission's problem.

B. Botterio said he heard others not saying that. M. Kramer commented she doesn't believe it is a McMansion, although it is larger than what some of the Commissioners would like to have on the lot. The ribbon of houses is nice, and the proposed house is long but not as tall. In that sense the vision of house has been reduced and that is important. T. Smurzynski feels that footprint has been reduced to an acceptable amount and that a 600sf footprint is too tough a house to consider. He is persuaded that a footprint of 1200sf is reasonable and that the building is sited, formed, and massed so that it's appropriate.

B. Botterio said he feels they have tried to make greater distance between two buildings. There is a large difference to what was originally proposed. For example, the driveway to right of building goes along the property line and is pushed to right to right to create more space.

S. Makowka summarized his opinion that, when visually looking at the site, the proposed house is going to be long, close to 187, and will detract from 187. The existing house and the settings upon which it is sited need to be preserved. And for the record, the Commission presented plenty of information about 1200-1600 sf houses being marketable in town, although, in the end, that is not a criteria that we use when making decisions. The idea contained in the guidelines is: Does the new addition or construction stand out such that the viewer asks "why is that here?"

Given the size, location and crowding effect on 187, he does not feel this proposal passes that test.

B. Cohen said size bothers her some, but the existence of too much detail really bothers her. It is lovely detail, but clearly there are way too many things happening here. For example, the French doors are not ancillary structure type of things. She suggested that the Applicant reduce the footprint and simplify the structure and you may get to objective of satisfying disagreeing Commissioners. The siting of this to 175 Lowell is also important.

A. Frisch said he can't add anything in terms of creating a "campus" feel for the site, but is concerned that we not forget to ask about the details of what would go onto any house: Is there anything on exterior that wouldn't be wood?

B. Botterio stated that the windows would have fixed muntins, Jel-Wend windows as approved on other buildings on that street. D. Levy said that he agrees with Steve and John that this project is still way off. The house is attractive, but doesn't meet the goals that he thought we set forth at the last meeting: smaller footprint and look ancillary to 187 Lowell. He would vote down on this current proposal personally.

Comments from the audience: C. Reitzel, 80 Westminster Ave., commented that the houses don't look like real houses that have been around for years. G. Hill, 175 Lowell, actually finds this proposal a reasonable compromise.

One of his concerns is that if this gets voted down, what's the alternative? He suggested that this could be a 40B development and doesn't think anybody wants that. Ideally, he would not have this next door, but really hopes that there is a compromise rather than a 40B development and stated that it is in the best interest of everybody to consider that scenario.

Attorney Dillon said he needs to convey to the Commission for his client that if requirement is to make smaller footprint they would not re-apply. S. Makowka asked for clarification of that statement. Since there has been an approval of a new building to the left of the existing structure on this lot, absent approval of this additional structure are you saying that you would move forward to build the approved house on the lot? Atty. Dillon responded that, if this house were denied they could move forward on the 2 houses or they could proceed separately on this house as proposed. They are willing to accept conditions with monitor oversight that would help deal with some of the other issues raised. S. Makowka stated that he appreciated the concerns and the neighbor's fears of 40B but does not feel that the Commission should make its decision based on the threat of a 40B. Anything that is approved needs to be appropriate to the District while hopefully meeting the needs of the property owners.

J. Worden asked petitioner if 2500 sf living space is necessary, why not do full below ground floor? D. Levy said the applicant is being creative in the wrong way. Take barn, make it in to a house that's the size of the house you need, but satisfy our concerns about making it look secondary to the other house. You're not moving in that direction. The design of the house is just as important. Beautiful house, but that's not what we're talking about. Really creative and more one dimensional on outside could work really well. This is so far off. However, he has seen many examples of

that being successful. If they're done in simple way, and look secondary to 187 Lowell then he thinks it's a win-win situation. Square footage is what he's 100 % concerned with in combination with the style of the house.

S. Makowka asked applicant about their desire for a continuance or a vote based on the proposal as it is before the Commission. B. Botterio asked to clarify, is the square footage not as relevant as design of house? D. Levy said being creative is important with potentially doing some below grade space and above ground living space, but doing it in way that is extremely simple, more like a barn/carriage house. B. Cohen said nothing proposed for this site has been barn like – more picking up on a Newton-style carriage-house.

One of neighbors suggested that there is a structure on corner of Orient and Westminster where a barn has been renovated. A question about the property and proposed new structure on Elder Terrace was asked by a neighbor.

The Commission indicated that that is not connected with this proposal that that it has not been presented to us at this time. Attorney Dillon stated that he would like to request a vote tonight, hoping to be approved with some sort of final design approval process. If the proposal is rejected, he stated that in all probability, the developer will go in another direction. J. Worden asked if this was a threat of 40B. Atty. Dillon answered that they will not come in for another house. B. Cohen said serious modifications would take quite a bit of hashing out for her to approve. A. Frisch asked if Commissioners would like to table until next month, however, S. Makowka said that the applicant can ask for a vote especially if they are not willing to continue the hearing.

B. Botterio said that he was confused about what the Commission meant by a carriage house/barn type structure. S. Makowka suggested that the consistent comment of the Commission has been that there is a lot of detail, the design is very involved, and the proposed house is too large. The whole idea was to simplify the structure which was not done -- this is not what the Commission spoke of ever. We are looking for a simple design that looks ancillary, small, set way in back and there has not ever been any confusion on our part. An ancillary-style building has always been mentioned. S. Makowka stated that he can't vote for this proposal now as presented. Attorney Dillon suggested resubmission of another drawing with new details, but with the Commission approving massing and footprint tonight.

S. Makowka stated that he appreciates the request for an answer tonight, but feels that it is incumbent upon the applicant to come up with a design and plead why that proposal is appropriate. He continued that to give you a definitive answer is in essence to vote on the proposal. This approach of splitting the decision had been proposed earlier for this site and the Commission had also declined to proceed in that fashion then as well.

Attorney Dillon said if they could get a clear understanding of exactly what the Commission would be looking to change from façade & design point of view that would be helpful. Very specific guidance would be helpful. J. Worden moved that Commission move that we table this meeting to form a subcommittee to come back with something that can be reviewed by the Commission as a whole. D. Levy seconded motion to table. D. Levy likes John's idea of a subcommittee working with them, taking the next month to nail down the details. He'd be willing to be part of that to try to get there – S. Makowka has no objection, but with the understanding that the subcommittee is not empowered to make any decision binding on the Commission. Three Commissioners appointed to participate: B. Cohen, D. Levy and J. Worden. All voted in favor of forming a subcommittee with no more than 3 to shall serve. If need be because of schedules or other restraints members may change. Hearing continued until next month with applicants consent.

d. Formal Hearing re: 82 Westminster – Incomplete application so there is nothing before the Commission to consider at this time.

e. Formal Hearing re: 7 Westmoreland. D. Levy stepped down from Commission for purposes of this hearing.

Applicant D. Levy described the existing pea stone driveway. He has decided to remove the pea stone and do concrete pavers with cobblestone apron at end of driveway. Also, in redoing driveway, he will need to rebuild a retaining wall on the right to retain the new driveway. The existing railroad tie wall is falling over. Replacement will be with stone wall to match existing wall on other side of driveway. The downhill neighbor to the right currently has a stockade fence on the property line. They have worked together and agreed that better solution would be to put a new fence on top of the new stone retaining wall since it will take up less space and eliminate a foot of useless land that doesn't do much. The new fence would be identical to the existing rear fence, with colonial cap, 4 feet high in back, and painted trim color. The last panel of fence, the only one in front of the front façade of the house, would slope down to provide sight lines for cars and pedestrians. Also, existing fence return along sidewalk will be removed. The applicant specified that the new fence will be no higher than finished height of the fence in the rear yard and the last panel will end at a post that is no higher than 2 feet, ell is lost. B. Cohen moved to accept proposal with the condition that that last panel will swoop down to maximum of 3ft, return along sidewalk be removed and tree will be left up to owner as to whether it remains or not. Fence will match existing one in rear of property and be painted to match.

Seconded by M. Kramer, voted unanimously with D. Levy abstaining. S. Makowka appointed monitor.

f. Informal Hearing re: 195 Pleasant St. (Avrahami). Mr. Avrahami gave an overview of the proposed project. The site is located at corner Pleasant and Kensington. The plan is to repair the front stairs and back stairs which are currently cement covered. He wants to get away from cement top, replacing them with limestone treads with stone design risers similar to existing conditions. The light color limestone treads would be similar to cement. For landing (large area) they want multicolor bluestone but these areas are not visible from a public way due to height of the landing areas. B. Cohen suggested bluestone as a possible alternative. A. Frisch doesn't like blue bluestone – would like gray bluestone. S. Makowka suggested that the Commission could approve bluestone, granite or limestone. S. Makowka explained a 10 day certificate process. The applicant explained that they plan to maintain existing profile of stairs and the proposed work would use current stairs as base. They would level what needs to be leveled and build on top of that base. For purposes of this hearing, S. Makowka appointed himself, Alex, David & Tom to Pleasant Street. B. Cohen moved that this proposal is so insubstantial as to not be incongruent with the intent of the District and thus is appropriate for a 10 day certificate. Seconded by A. Frisch, voted unanimously in favor. B. Cohen moved that applicant be issued certificate, subject to a ten day notification period, to repair stairs with limestone or granite

treads as proposed to improve durability and repair steps, seconded by A. Frisch. Voted unanimously in favor. S. Makowka appointed monitor.

Meeting adjourned 11:22pm.